

DOING OUR OWN EASTER

Finding meaning in this weekend presents an unbeliever with a number of problems. I have already suggested that we dispense with an examination of the pagan ones. They are mostly grounded in various forms of nature worship; you can still decide whether you will enjoy an “Easter” sunrise observance even if it did originate with the pagan god, Baal. And like some modern pagans, you can still choose to deny yourself goodies during Lent even though there is no historically Christian reason to support its observance. And by all means let us do a pagan Anglo-Saxon Spring Festival but not till September. The real problem arises from the fact that according to Tacitus and Josephus there is only one historical event in the life of Jesus of Nazareth which we can be sure of, . It is that he died. The list of problems is a long one: the radical literary style of the gospel writers, their hidden purpose in relating their stories, their use of a second language to Aramaic, not to mention the varying memories of geriatric observers and hear sayers who reported the events to the gospel writers, none of whom were eye witnesses, etc., etc.. We are compelled to lean heavily on such scholars as the members of the Jesus Seminar and proceed with a story based on non-supernatural possibilities and high natural probabilities. I hope our story will inspire us.

To begin with, Jesus was not put on the cross because of the peaceful songs of children waving branches on Palm Sunday. In trying to identify the trigger for Jesus’ arrest, John Dominic Crossan dismisses the Palm Sunday story. He calls it a “retrojected” fulfilment of an Old Testament prophesy. The gospel writer took an Old Testament psalm , put it into the mouths of innocent kids and wrapped a story around it. On the other hand, it could conceivably be factual. If so, it could have been a provocative demonstration contrived by Jesus in opposition to a march of the Roman Guard which was parading on the opposite side of town.

Nor did he die as forecast at the Last Supper because of a divine requirement. Viz. that his body should be broken and his blood shed for us. The account of the Eucharist, Crossan says, was a ritual, created by certain Christian groups after his death. It was definitely not Jesus’ explanation for his imminent demise. If it did take place it was another of many provocative words and actions that characterised Jesus last visit to Jerusalem. Let us suppose it did. The standard way for the Christian church in the west to observe the events of Easter was not decided at the time the gospel stories were written. It was not until the Emperor Constantine called the bishops together at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. His purpose was to bang their heads together and stop them quarrelling over the date and the method of celebrating Easter. He wanted to make them do it on “one and the same day”(his words). Why? The controversy focussed on the true observance of the Last Supper. The Eastern faction of the early church insisted that it was held on the day of the Jewish Passover. This would fix the date for Easter as the 14th day of Nisan— that being the 14th day after the first full moon following the vernal equinox. The Roman

faction on the other hand was for the first Sunday after the 14th day of Nissan. And it got the vote. This was obviously because Constantine was a high profile Roman convert to Christianity in the Roman church. He had a vested interest in deflecting the blame for Jesus death away from Empire on to the Jews. Having the central celebration of the religion of Empire identified with a Jewish feast day was therefore a no-no.

It seems quite likely however, that the date of the Eastern church was correct. As early as 159AD Polycarp, their Bishop of Smyrna had petitioned the Pope on behalf of his followers for the fourteenth of Nissan. It was probably the major cause of his martyrdom. Forty years later his successor, Bishop Polycrates withstood the Roman Pope and survived martyrdom. But why you may be asking is this an important matter? It is because it gives the answer as to why Jesus was crucified.

This first celebration of what is now regarded as the Eucharist was actually the earlier gospel writers' account of a Passover meal. At the meal Jesus is giving three messages. It was not a commemoration of his sacrifice for our sins any more that it was his prophesy of it. It was clearly what Emperor Constantine was afraid of, a new Passover — a re-enactment of the Jewish celebration of national deliverance from an oppressive power. Caesar was King Pharaoh of Egypt whose first born was about to be smitten by the angel of Death. The gospel writers were telling the Easter story after the harsh suppression of the Jews and the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. In their story they make Jesus contemplate the shedding of his blood by execution. He compares his own blood with the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the lintels of the Israelite slaves to save them from the angel of death. He also contemplates the journey to spiritual freedom the world would take if it followed his way. So he identified his soon to be broken body with the unleavened bread which the Israelites in Egypt were preparing for their journey to the promised land, Jesus was thus making three politically insurrectionist and treasonous statements. One, that the angel of death was hovering over the Roman oppressors of his people, and two, that by following his teaching and example, the oppressed could enjoy true inner freedom from the conditions imposed by the Roman yolk. This take on the Last Supper blows the substitutionary theory of the atonement out of the water! His third statement was a personal message to his disciples, "Do this (i.e "Be a provocative, non-violent revolutionary of the Kingdom") in remembrance of me." Fortunately it was done in private, otherwise he could have been arrested in the very act.

James the brother of Jesus probably became a very influential figure in the religious circles of the early Jewish Christian church. He may have been among Jesus' siblings who goaded him into bringing his teachings into the open at Jerusalem.(iii) Those teachings were a recipe for changing the world. It could be done by those who followed his way. i.e. by responding to violence with non-violence and by loving one's enemies. Lorraine Parkinson in her book, "The World According to Jesus", speculates beautifully on what the world would have been like had Jesus remained

in the back woods of Galilee with that transforming message.(**) He could have kept his passion for non-violent resistance to moral evil or injustice locked up in his own soul. He could have left it to somebody else to put it on centre stage. But he went up to Jerusalem and paid the ultimate price for doing so. It is beyond doubt that it was because of those teachings that HE WAS DETAINED AS A RABBLE ROUSER WHOSE PROCLAMATIONS ABOUT GOD'S KINGDOM OF LOVE AND JUSTICE WERE SEEN AS AN AFFRONT TO THE POWER OF ROME, A DENIAL OF THE DEIFICATION OF THE EMPEROR AND A DISTURBANCE OF THE PEACE.

But it wasn't just his treasonous words. The most likely final provocation for his arrest was his symbolic destruction of the corrupt Temple system. It was an unholy alliance between church and state. Jesus' outrage at the religious and political injustices perpetrated by the temple authorities boiled over when he overthrew the tables of the money changers, etc. Contrary to what I was taught in Sunday School, this was not a cleansing of the temple precincts of financial dealing; the sale of sacrifices was a necessary part of temple worship. No, Jesus was making a political statement about its corruption, not of the money changers but of the whole institution (a den of thieves robbing the common people of their dignity and spiritual freedom).(ii) THIS WAS A DISPLAY OF JESUS' JUSTIFIABLE ANGER — HIS PUBLIC EXPOSURE OF THE ROTTEN RELIGIOUS SYSTEM. IT WAS CARRIED OUT IN THE MIDST OF THE CROWDS AT PASSOVER TIME WHEN THE ROMAN GUARD WAS JITTERY ABOUT ANY SIGN OF REBELLION. CROSSAN THINKS IT WAS THAT WHICH CAUSED THE SOLDIERS TO MOVE IN AND ARREST HIM.

At the mock trial, Barabbas was not a thief; he was one of the many violent peasant freedom fighters who were admired and protected by the poor for the courage with which they stood up to oppression. The crowd preferred the rebel with weapons, over an unarmed saviour!(v) THE SUPPRESSED POPULATION WENT FOR THE PROMISE OF LIBERATION THROUGH ARMED CONFLICT. WHEN IT CAME TO THE CRUNCH, JESUS LOST POPULAR SUPPORT. IT WAS BECAUSE OF A CONTEMPORARY CONVICTION THAT VIOLENCE IS SUPERIOR TO LOVE IN ACHIEVING THE CROWD'S MATERIAL & PHYSICAL HOPES.

Crucifixion was the Roman method of execution reserved for the lower classes, for enemies, or for shaming an upper class victim. To be crucified was regarded as the ultimate humiliation, and the utmost dishonour. The Romans used this "state terrorism" as an effective means of crowd control. And Pilate, not the Jews has to accept the responsibility for Jesus' execution.

For his calculating cruelty, and his complete disregard for Jewish piety, Pontius Pilate was renowned. He was eventually banished and sent to Tiberius to explain his callous behaviour. His conciliatory attitude towards Jesus is "absolutely unhistorical". Mark could have created the story in order to send up his evil character.(iv) Like a script writer for the Greens telling a story about Tony Abbot hosting a welcome party for the boat people or a wedding reception for a gay marriage!!! Despite the fact that thousands were executed at a time in order to suppress uprisings, little trace of

archaeological remains has ever been found. Hence normally, no proper burials ever took place. The corpses were left to the mercy of the birds of prey and the wild dogs.(i) NOT THE SANITISED VERSION OF JESUS' DEATH FOUND IN THE GOSPEL STORY!!

If Crossan is correct, it is most unlikely that Pilate would have taken the trouble to engage in a philosophical conversation with a prisoner, or negotiate with a rich man about taking scum off the crosses. Consequently, JESUS DIED THE DEATH OF A NOBODY AT THE HANDS OF A SADISTIC RULER? When carefully analysed, the stories about the disposal of the body of Jesus have been gradually turned into respectable accounts of what couldn't possibly have happened.(*****)

IN ORDER FOR THE EARLY DISCIPLES TO EXPERIENCE FULNESS OF LIFE IN THE MIDST OF DISAPPOINTMENT, SUFFERING AND DEATH, WAS IT NECESSARY FOR THEM TO DENY THE BAD, THE SAD AND THE TRAGIC? The Gospel writers must have thought so and the Christian church has followed suit for the last 2,000 years. Nevertheless for the early disciples there was no such gloss. Their belief in the spirit world, their propensity for altered states of consciousness, and the transforming effect of personal contact with Jesus, continued to play on their minds. It drove them to try and make sense of his execution. It took about two years before their theories were formulated, and two generations before they began to be written down in another language. Bearing in mind the significance of the Last Supper for the first disciples, let us try to fathom their response to his death and then consider what we can make of it 2000 years later?

The first record is by Paul who actually lived out the principles of the New Passover. He challenged the deity of the emperor and was ultimately executed for it. He wrote about 25 years after the crucifixion that Jesus was "raised" on the third day. He then says that this "raised" Jesus appeared to over 500 people including himself. Although it was only "audible" his apparently identical "appearance" experience happened presumably on the road to Damascus. This would have been up to six years after the crucifixion. (Note that this enabled him to claim apostleship along with the original disciples) According to Paul, whatever the resurrection experiences were they did not all take place on the third day (a colloquialism for "straight away"). And as Jack Spong says, they were "real but not physical".

The author of Mark wrote next around 45 years after the crucifixion. All that he says is that a messenger told a group of women at the tomb, "He is not here, he has been raised". The messenger tells them that the "raised" Jesus was going ahead of the disciples to Galilee which was 7 day's walk away. According to Mark, therefore, for the disciples the first Easter Sunday happened a week late!

The subsequent accounts of Easter were written ten years later by the author of Matthew, and ten more years after that by Luke and in 100 AD by the authors of John's gospel, and the Gospel of Peter in 200 AD. They are increasingly embellished contradictions of Paul and Mark, and are obviously not entirely

historical. Crossan points out that the underlying aim of these Easter authors was not primarily to give us fine details of the Easter story at all!! Their goal was political, intended to settle leadership and authority issues in the early church. If he is correct, it is no wonder that they bent the truth!!(*)

So what are we left with for Easter Sunday, 2013? Chocolate eggs, bilbies and a gross bastardization of a tragic and sensitive event in history? No, that is not all. Regardless of our denominational affiliation as Unitarian, (or perhaps because of it!!), I think we owe something to this good man . We owe it to him to try to rectify at least to our personal satisfaction what greedy commercialization, church politics and bad theology have done to him and to his mission. It is not too late for us to have our first Easter Sunday two thousand years after he died.

To do so I suggest that speaking mystically but not historically, we attribute a high degree of integrity to the gospel writers of the Easter story in regard to their estimate of Jesus and the impact his life made upon them. They prove that the quality of life of this real person was extremely meaningful to them. So much so that they had to make up contemporary mythological stories to prove that his words and deeds exuded a transforming and inspiring God-presence. The stories of Paul and Mark are the first relatively unadulterated accounts available. Speaking historically, I suggest also that we take some (only some!) of their writing literally. i.e. That we identify with the first disciples who, with none of the later fabricated resurrection stories, were bearing the grievous loss of their devoted leader, while doing the 7 day trek back to their fishing nets, with no prospect of seeing him again, but with his love still pounding in their hearts. That love was even then beginning to ignite their faith. Their challenge, despite apparent failure and defeat was to live his dream without him and make it theirs.

Lorraine Parkinson, does not subscribe to traditional Christian doctrines of incarnation which understands Jesus to be the second person of a triune God. She says that such a super-human Christ image puts his message out of reach of those who seek to follow his example and observe his teaching.(***) (She should have been a Unitarian!) Lorraine lays great store by the words that Matthew wrote about Jesus' messages in the Beatitudes and about going the second mile.(**) She sees them as a non-violent but seditious resistance to evil, confronting the structures underlying the exercise of Rome's merciless imperialism under which Jesus followers lived while still in possession of their inner freedom and personal dignity. (****) Jesus execution left them to continue living with integrity in such a world. Crossan describes them: "They had walked and talked with Jesus while he was alive and had a continuing love and affection for him after he died. They had experienced his continuing power and vision, and were determined to follow his example." In those far off days they were not yet called Christians. Those of us who may or may not choose to call ourselves Christian can imagine ourselves into an appreciation of his earthly life and try to do the same.

Reference pages are to “Jesus a Revolutionary Biography” by John Dominic Crossan:

- (i) 123-127
- (ii) 127-133
- (iii) 133-136
- (iv) 136-140
- (v) 140-143
- (vi) 143-152 & 160-163
- (vii) 152-158

(*) (Ten years after Mark, Matthew copied all of Mark and added to his account. Mark’s “messenger” to the women became Matthew’s (supernatural?) angel. A physical Jesus does appear to them at the tomb in Jerusalem; they held his feet. The disciples meet Mark’s Jesus dressed in apocalyptic clothing on top of a Galilean mountain. He tells them to go and proclaim the gospel and that he would be always with them.

Ten years later, Luke says there were two angel messengers, not one. He contradicts Mark, saying that all of the appearances happened in the area of Jerusalem, not in Galilee. And he adds to the physical capacities of Jesus by saying that he walked, talked, ate, offered his body to be felt, and gave interpretations of the scriptures. Because a resuscitated body would need to die again Luke copes with this eventuality by telling the ascension story for the first time. No need for a second burial.

The authors of John’s gospel wrote about 100 A.D. and added four new stories involving Mary Magdalene, Peter and the beloved disciple, receiving the holy spirit in the upper room and doubting Thomas. Two of them were resuscitated body stories, and they were all located in Jerusalem and therefore also contradicted Mark. The upper room story contradicted Luke’s Pentecost story. Despite our baffling attempts to work out what really happened on the first Easter, Crossan points out that the underlying aim of the Easter authors was not primarily to give us fine details of the Easter story at all!! Their goal was political, intended to settle leadership and authority issues in the early church. If he is correct, it is no wonder that they bent the truth!!

(**) pp197 ff., Lorraine Parkinson, “The World According to Jesus – His Blueprint for the Best Possible World”, Spectrum Publications, 2011

(***) pp 223 ff., *ibid.*

(****) pp 204 ff., *ibid.*

(*****) The account of Joseph of Aramathea is so out of sync with the prevailing culture as to be unbelievable. Bribery or influence of a special kind would have been

necessary to obtain the body of a suspected revolutionary. Even then it would have been exceptionally dangerous to do so. The final version about Joseph's family tomb is contradictory. If he was a member of the Sanhedrin, he would have been in favour of Jesus' execution. How then could he have also been a disciple and a mate of Nicodemus? It seems unlikely that by the first Easter Saturday any of Jesus' disciples would have known where his body was.(vii) The horror of Jesus' brutal death has been transformed (Crossan says, "sublimated") through hope and imagination by the gospel account of his burial, into its opposite!!